03/29/2004 – Week #21 – The NIT, Rounds 2 and 3

On to the Final Four! OK, it's not the NCAA Final Four, it's the National Invitation Tournament (NIT) Final Four, but it's still a big deal.

The University of Michigan men's basketball team played 2 more games in the NIT last week, and they won them both. On Monday (03/22/2004), they beat Oklahoma 63-52 in Crisler Arena, then on Wednesday (03/24/2004), they beat Hawaii 88-73, also in Crisler Arena. The wins raise UM's overall record to 21-11, which is an important milestone. The last time UM won at least 20 games was 1997, but those victories were all forfeited in the Eddie Martin Mess. Reaching the 20-wins milestone is a big deal.

The 2 wins also allow Michigan to move on to the NIT Final Four, in Madison Square Garden in New York City, next week. The semifinals are on Tuesday (03/30/2004), and the championship game is on Thursday (04/01/2004). Michigan will play Oregon (18-12) at 9:00 p.m. on Tuesday, and if they can win that one, they'll play in the championship game against the winner of the first semifinal game between Rutgers (19-12) and Iowa State (20-12). There is also a consolation game, but we won't think about that. Visit the NIT site for the complete bracket.

More about the Final Four in a minute. First, let's look at the 2 games from last week, one at a time.

The Oklahoma game was very hard-fought, and very physical. It was another seesaw battle, and Michigan pulled out the victory in the couple last minutes. With 2:44 left in the game, UM was only up by 2 (49-47), but they played tough basketball down the stretch, and outscored Oklahoma 14-5 to seal up the win. Keep in mind that Oklahoma was ranked as high as #8 this season, and that they beat Michigan State at The Palace of Auburn Hills back in early December.

Once again, the crowd was a big factor in the Oklahoma game, and once again, it wasn't just the Maize Rage. For last week's game against Missouri, they only had 36 hours to sell tickets, so only about 5500 fans made it to the 1st round game. For the Oklahoma game, they had 6 days to sell tickets, and the fans bought them. 11,241 of them, to be exact. It was one of the best crowds we've seen in Crisler in years. They were loud and proud, and they definitely inspired the team. As I pointed out last week, the fans who bought tickets to the game showed up and made some noise. The Maize Rage did another great job of getting the crowd going, and the crowd did a great job of cheering on the team. It was a pleasure to be a part of it. It was quite a contrast to the normal season ticket holders, who have bought their tickets for 25 years, and don't always show up. Even when they do, the Old Guard doesn't make much noise, and they shoot dirty looks at the fans who do.

The stats for the Oklahoma game show where the game was won: at the free-throw line. Oklahoma was 9-for-13 (69%), but Michigan was 21-for-28 (75%). That's a 12-point difference, which is just about the difference in the final score. The rest of the stats are pretty even: Michigan shot 45% (19-for-42) from the floor, while Oklahoma shot 36% (19-for-53). Neither team shot 3-pointers very well: UM was 4-for-13 (31%), OU was 5-for-21 (24%). UM out-rebounded Oklahoma (31-29), and the turnovers were even, 15-15.

The Hawaii game was also close, and also hard-fought. Michigan led most of the way, but Hawaii hung around. They were within 7 points (63-56) with about 10 minutes to go, then UM started pulling away. The lead got as high as 22 points before Coach Amaker pulled the

starters with 1:34 to go. It was a great way to say goodbye to the seniors, as Colin Dill came in for Bernard Robinson, Jr., and played the last 94 seconds.

Even though they only had 36 hours to sell tickets for the Hawaii game, there was another big, loud crowd in attendance, all 10,306 of them. The Maize Rage was bigger than ever, and they got the whole place rocking. It was awesome to see and hear what a large, enthusiastic crowd could do. The team responded to the energy, and that got the crowd going even more. It was lots of fun.

The stats in the Hawaii game were a little more lopsided. Both teams took 58 shots, but UM hit 34 of them (59%), while Hawaii only hit 28 of them (48%). Of the 58 shots that Hawaii took, 25 of them were 3-pointers, and they hit 8 of those, for 32% shooting. Michigan only shot 27% from 3-point range (3-for-11). The most impressive stat was free-throw shooting. Michigan made more free-throws (17) than Hawaii attempted (12). UM was a very impressive 17-for-19 (90%) at the line, compared to 75% (9-for-12) for Hawaii. Michigan won the rebounding battle, 31-25, and turnovers were even, at 15 apiece.

Individually, the 2 "DH" players had a good week. Dion Harris started in place of the injured Lester Abram in both games, and scored 17 points against Oklahoma, and 12 points against Hawaii. He was the leading scorer in the Oklahoma game. The other "DH", Daniel Horton, had 12 points against Oklahoma, and 13 against Hawaii. Robinson had a pretty good game (8 points and 9 rebounds) against Oklahoma, and an even better game against Hawaii, with 14 points. Graham Brown had a quiet game against Oklahoma, with 2 points, but he exploded for 14 points and 6 rebounds against Hawaii. The final starter, Courtney Sims, had a sub-par week, with 5 and 4 points, respectively.

The bench players really contributed in both games. Chris Hunter had 10 and 6 points, and 4 rebounds in each game. Brent Petway scored 8 points in both games, and grabbed 6 and 4 rebounds, respectively. He also had a couple monster dunks, and a great blocked shot just before halftime of the Hawaii game. Sherrod Harrell had 1 point in the Oklahoma game. Besides Colin Dill, 3 other bench players got in for the last 1:34 of the Hawaii game: Dani Wohl, J.C. Mathis, and Amadou Ba. They played hard, but failed to score.

The big news about the bench players was Lester Abram. After missing 3 games (Illinois, Missouri, and Oklahoma) due to the shoulder injury he sustained in the Iowa game in the Big Ten Tournament, he finally got into the Hawaii game, with about 6:30 gone in the 1st half. He responded right away with a sweet 3-pointer, and he threw down a great dunk later in the game, and looked good out there. He didn't seem to show any ill-effects from his injury, and he played 21 very productive minutes. He ended up being Michigan's high-scorer for the game, with 17 points, along with 5 rebounds. It was great to get him back.

Six Big Ten teams went to post-season tournaments: 3 to the NCAA Tournament (Illinois, Michigan State, and Wisconsin), and 3 to the NIT (Iowa, Michigan, and Purdue). Three of them lost in the 1st round (Michigan State, Iowa, and Purdue), one of them lost in the 2nd round (Wisconsin), and one of them lost in the 3rd round (Illinois). As of Saturday morning (03/27/2004), only one Big Ten team is left standing: Michigan.

So, is it better to go to the NCAA Tournament and lose in the 1st round, ala MSU, or is it better to go to the NIT and get to the Final Four? Two weeks ago, I would have said "give me the NCAA", but now I'm not so sure. I think that a young team like Michigan will get a lot more benefit out of the NIT than the NCAA. For one thing, they'll get to play 5 post-season games, instead of just 1. For another, winning (at least) 3 games in post-season play will really help their confidence going into next year. Finally, getting to 20 wins (and

beyond) for the season is a big boost for the program. Regardless of how they do in the Final Four, their NIT experience has been very positive. It was great to get 3 more home games, and it was fabulous to see how good the crowds in Crisler could really be.

Looking at the other 3 teams in the Final Four, there's no reason that Michigan can't win it all. Michigan has the best overall record of any of the teams in the Final Four, and they've been playing better as the tournament has gone on. While it's true that they haven't played very well away from the friendly confines of Crisler Arena, they've done a lot better on neutral courts (2-1) than in actual "away" games (3-7). They have Lester Abram back, and he appears to be at close to 100%.

All the NIT games will be televised on ESPN2, so be sure to tune by and watch the Wolverines. Then, stop back again next week to see what happened, and why.